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The Ebb and Flow of Stabilization in the Congo

BY HUGO DE VRIES

Key points

- The revised International Security and Stabilization Support Strategy (I4S) is perhaps the UN's first coherent, detailed approach to stabilization, focusing on locally relevant drivers of conflict.
- Despite the strategy's appeal to donors, provincial governments, and NGOs, there has been little evidence that the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC, MONUSCO, is engaging with it.
- MONUSCO is institutionally drawn to the presentation of joint UN-Congolese military operations, as well as the expansion of the Congolese state, as contributions to stabilization, despite the limited effect this has had in the past.
- Insecurity is meanwhile rife in the eastern provinces, while high-profile initiatives such as the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) have lost momentum.
- The time may therefore be ripe for MONUSCO to embrace the I4S but, regardless of MONUSCO's stance, its partners should push ahead with this framework.

Introduction

Stabilization has become a buzzword in peacekeeping, with UN missions in such diverse environments as Haiti, the Central African Republic, and Mali all claiming it as their central goal. Few of these missions, however, seem to have a clear understanding of what the concept means in practice.¹ The UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) appears to refer to stabilization as a transitory phase between



I4S police housing project in Bitale, South Kivu, 2014.

all-out conflict and development, which in practice consists of support to military operations, rebuilding state institutions, and conducting socio-economic recovery work to undermine the appeal of armed groups. Should it wish, DPKO could have an excellent test case in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) for its ideas on stabilization. It is here where the assumptions and activities of stabilization have been tested for longer than in any other peacekeeping environment—and where the UN's difficulties in moving away from a focus on short-term, technical solutions have become clear.²

The misuses of state-building

Even before it had the 'S' for stabilization in its title and was still known as MONUC, the *Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation de la République démocratique du Congo* (MONUSCO, United Nations Stabilization Mission in the DRC) began coordinating stabilization activities. The first phase of the I4S was preceded by the creation of a small stabilization office in the office of the Eastern Coordinator, with a specific but modest set of stabilization goals on four main axes in the eastern provinces (2008–2009). A second phase (2009–2012) took shape along the preferred lines of

the DRC government and MONUC. The strategy of supporting military operations and the filling of supposed state vacuums aimed to diminish conflict. This was to be achieved by rehabilitating hundreds of kilometres of roads, constructing dozens of state structures, and training thousands of administrative and police officials, on top of economic recovery programmes for almost half a million people, in order to provide alternatives to those joining armed groups. A USD 367 million project portfolio was thus implemented by UN agencies and NGOs but the strategy did not have the intended results.³ New roads and buildings led to new types of predatory behaviour by state agents, and training had little impact on behavioural change. Development programmes that did not specifically target local tensions had little effect. Also, the first phase of the I4S was not clear about its theory of change. How could a one-size-fits-all process of restoring state institutions prevent conflicts based on the nature of that state, as well as on localized issues of access to land, identity, and customary authority? The government in Kinshasa, moreover, had fundamentally different assumptions about the I4S from its international partners. To the Congolese government, stabilization was also a process of expanding its grip on sources of political and economic patronage.⁴ As a consequence, the preconditions for stabilization to work, such as political dialogue with local communities, working against impunity, and reforming the security sector, were barely addressed.

The years 2009–2012 were some of the bloodiest years in Congolese history since the Second Congo War (1998–2003), culminating in the fall of Goma to the M23 rebel movement in November 2012. This turbulence was a clear indication that previous efforts at stabilization focusing on technocratic state-building had been an inadequate response to deeply political problems.

A diversified approach to stabilization

In reaction, the Security Council requested a revision of I4S. A lengthy and participatory process ensued, led by MONUSCO's Stabilization Support Unit (SSU) and drawing in government officials, UN partners, and civil society. Between 2012 and 2015, the strategy was substantially revised and more or less turned on its head. The

top-down approach for restoring the state was replaced by a new focus on locally relevant drivers of conflicts over power, land and identity, and on relations between communities and the state.⁵ At its core, the revised I4S was not just a programme framework, but a frank attempt to fundamentally change the way the international community was working in the Congo. The strategy recognized that national-level engagement was required to really stabilize the country, but suggested an approach that could have effect at the local level, even if this engagement did not materialize nationally. Stabilization was defined as a process where state and society build reciprocal accountability and address locally specific causes of violent conflict. A series of assessments was undertaken of the various conflict systems across the east and on the basis of this, programme priorities were established with the provincial governments. Community dialogue became the cornerstone of this strategy, allowing activities to be based on local understandings of what was creating violence. This led to a more diversified approach to stabilization. For example, security activities would focus on building rapport between locally deployed soldiers and communities, patrolling on the basis of jointly identified priorities—and higher-level authorities would support a clearer division of labour between the local administration and customary leaders.

The I4S also positioned itself as a support framework for the various other processes MONUSCO was involved in: 'holding and building' after 'clearing' operations; community security as a second track of security sector reform (SSR); and community-driven reintegration projects under a new disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programme for ex-combatants. Donors financed some USD 50 million worth of new projects for dialogue and socio-economic recovery under the new I4S, so that provincial governments which had been closely involved in setting priorities reportedly felt more empowered.⁶ International NGOs, which used to be quite critical of the original I4S, also supported the revised strategy. All the ingredients seemed in place for MONUSCO to make a major contribution to stabilizing the eastern DRC. However, events took a different turn.

MONUSCO's limitations

Between late 2012 and 2015, MONUSCO seems to have gone in various directions, committing only half-heartedly to the new stabilization strategy, while pursuing various other policies that it defined as contributing to stabilization. However, it remained unclear how these other policies related to the revised I4S, and what end results they were seeking.

The much-debated FIB, which was deployed to support the Congolese army in offensive operations against rebel forces, eclipsed nearly everything else the mission was doing. The brigade was presented not only as a new form of robust peace enforcement, but judging by the discussions in the Security Council at the time, also as MONUSCO's approach to stabilization, in line with the military origins of the concept.⁷ In retrospect, the FIB was perhaps not the game changer it was intended to be—its momentum significantly diminished after the defeat of the M23—but it did act as a distraction from in-depth discussions on the political state of play in the eastern DRC, including the lessons learned from the I4S.⁸

During the same period, MONUSCO also started discussing several stabilization-like concepts it might use from other conflict settings, rather than from the I4S, albeit most of these seemed like simplified versions of the first phase of that strategy. The first concept was that of the Justice and Security Hubs. This idea originated in Liberia, where the UN mission supported the construction of geographically concentrated state structures and the training of state personnel. The notable difference between the first phase of the I4S and the Hubs, however, was that the Liberian state provided support to the deployment of staff and the payment of their salaries, which the Congolese government had consistently failed to do.

The second concept was Community Violence Reduction, or CVR. The UN mission in Haiti had piloted CVR in the slums of Port-au-Prince where manual labour projects for unemployed youths were combined with police activities. How this concept was going to be used in the DRC wasn't entirely clear. CVR had been piloted in an urban setting and was focused on youth gangs—a very different context from that of the eastern DRC. Moreover, the first phase of the I4S had already

shown that development activities that were not linked to local political dynamics had little effect on diminishing conflict.

The third concept, which the MONUSCO leadership decided to publicly invest itself in, was that of the Islands of Stability. The concept drew sustained criticism from NGOs.⁹ It was never made clear whether the Islands were a methodology or a supposed end-state. In practice, MONUSCO deployed staff in areas cleared through joint military operations with the Congolese army to accompany returning authorities, and provided funds for quick impact projects to rehabilitate roads and buildings, and undertake manual labour works. The Islands were referred to as a first step towards the I4S, but in reality the choice of Islands was based on military imperatives relating to the joint operations, rather than on addressing local drivers of conflict in a comprehensive manner. Furthermore, the policy focused on urban centres rather than on wider conflicts, and its build-and-train approach had already been tried by the I4S on a much larger scale and found to be wanting.¹⁰

The FIB, the Hubs, CVR, and the Islands of Stability reveal much about the mission's assumptions with regard to stabilization. To MONUSCO, the concept seemed to be a catch-all term: 'If it helps, it stabilizes.'¹¹ At times, in mission reports between 2012 and 2015, stabilization was a heading under which issues as diverse as SSR, DDR, child protection and even elections were mentioned.¹² One of the few times the concept was discussed openly was by mission chief Martin Kobler who, at the end of his mandate, claimed that he had always had an issue with the 'S' in MONUSCO as to him, stabilization meant a minimalistic return to a calm but negative status quo. In his view, this type of stability had already been achieved by 2015 due to MONUSCO's presence in the field. The mission should go further by supporting state institutions and economic development, particularly around urban centres such as Goma.¹³ However, aside from being a perhaps too positive assessment of the state of the eastern provinces by 2015, Kobler's ambitions did not entirely match what MONUSCO continued to do in practice.

Looking at MONUSCO's actual activities, the mission's core stabilization tasks continued to consist of supporting military operations and the

strengthening of state authorities. This was visible in the Hubs, CVR and the Islands of Stability as well. All three of these proposed approaches emphasized the rehabilitation of roads and buildings, and training and accompaniment to expand the presence of the state in the countryside. Despite critical lessons learned over the last years, it seemed that the expansion of state authority was still supposed to solve conflict at the local level. This assumption fitted in well with the peacekeeping mission's traditional capacities.

Thus, rather than formulating a strategy based on local needs, the process was reverse. A strategy was developed out of what the mission was traditionally mandated to do—and was subsequently labelled 'stabilization'—making it a largely supply-driven process. The constant pressure that the mission faced from the Congolese government and the Security Council to deliver quick and visible results could only reinforce this tendency. Once the M23 had been defeated, the national government became less and less interested in working with the UN and began focusing on consolidating its power and preparing for the next elections.

In such a context, the I4S posed questions about the very nature of peacekeeping activities and how to work with a predatory state, questions which were not easy for MONUSCO to answer. While military operations against prominent armed groups such as the *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR, Democratic Liberation Forces of Rwanda) were on hold, and political processes such as SSR were making little headway, the mission had to be active on other fronts. This made activities such as the Islands of Stability all the more attractive, since they were visible, easily quantifiable and played to what the mission already knew how to do.¹⁴

Several observers have noted how MONUSCO has become a somewhat cynical mission over the last years, with little faith that it can change the status quo in the country. This is reflected in its institutional resistance to out-of-the-box thinking.¹⁵ There has also been little external pressure on the mission to change. Firstly, the UN Security Council was mainly interested in broad political processes, such as regional diplomacy, elections, and the FIB. Secondly, I4S's donors such as the UK, the US, Switzerland and the Netherlands only backed the

revised stabilization strategy to a limited extent. Although they funded new programmes, they rarely engaged with the DPKO at a higher level to address MONUSCO's way of operating. Finally, the I4S revision may have been too layered and detailed to gain immediate traction within the mission. Although the initial strategic approach was largely ready to be used even before the FIB deployed, the revision took a long time. Furthermore, many within MONUSCO, particularly its leadership and the Civil Affairs Section, considered the revised I4S to be too complex and too academic, although it encompassed USD 367 million of concrete, visible projects. Instead what they wanted was a straightforward programmatic approach that could help raise funds and quickly roll out activities. For these various reasons, the strategy was not seized upon as an organizing framework for mission activities and rarely mentioned in formal reports.

Policy implications

At this time, the mission leadership seems to continue to accord the I4S relatively little priority, despite the fact that alternative strategies have yielded limited results. The context, however, is ripe for the mission to rethink its approach. The FIB has lost momentum, armed groups continue to proliferate and the Congolese government is demanding a serious downsizing of peacekeeping troops. Depending on whether relations between the government and the UN further deteriorate, MONUSCO may have to re-think how it will achieve locally relevant results without the engagement of the national government, and even start preparing an exit strategy. To do so, it could begin by following the recommendations of DPKO's recent peacekeeping review, which suggests focusing on local political realities and area-based, people-focused peacebuilding. This could translate into putting its support behind the revised I4S, which takes these principles as a point of departure.¹⁶

However, MONUSCO may still see few institutional incentives to change its current policies. At the time of writing, the DPKO's best practice section is drafting a critical report on lessons learned from the I4S and the Islands of Stability. While this may temporarily re-focus attention on stabilization, the 2016 elections will

probably absorb most of the Security Council's attention.

While MONUSCO is deciding what to do next in terms of stabilization, the I4S and its partners could try to move ahead themselves, implementing concrete, context-specific activities to address local tensions in close collaboration with the provincial authorities. This would allow MONUSCO SSU, as the I4S's coordinator, to build momentum by incorporating the I4S's current programmes into those of other national and international partners and fitting them into the new stabilization priority

Notes

1 David Curran and Paul Holtom, 'Resonating, Rejecting, Reinterpreting: Mapping the Stabilization Discourse in the United Nations Security Council, 2000–2014', *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 4/1 (2015), 1–18. Accessed 3 November 2015. (<http://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.gm/>)

2 For a more detailed analysis of MONUSCO's activities in the DRC, see Hugo de Vries, 'Going Around in Circles: The Challenges of Peacekeeping and Stabilization in the Democratic Republic of Congo', Conflict Research Unit (CRU) Report, Clingendael Institute, 2015. (http://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/going_around_in_circles.pdf)

3 For this paragraph, and analysis of the first phase of the I4S, see Emily Paddon and Guillaume Lacaille, 'Stabilising the Congo', Forced Migration Policy Briefing No. 8, Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford University, 2011. Accessed 6 February 2012. (<http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/files/publications/policy-briefing-series/pb8-stabilising-congo-2011.pdf>); Ian D. Quick, *Follies in Fragile States: How International Stabilisation Failed in the Congo*, London: Double Loop, 2015; and MONUSCO, 'International Security and Stabilization Support Strategy 2013–2017', MONUSCO, 2012. Accessed 7 January 2013. (http://www.unpbf.org/wp-content/uploads/ISSSS-2013-2017-Strategic-Framework-FINAL_EN.pdf)

4 De Vries, 2015

5 MONUSCO, 'International Security and Stabilization Support Strategy 2013–2017', 2012. On top of this framework, there are five thematic pillar strategies, thirteen territorially specific conflict assessments, priority plans, and a new monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework.

plans. When this process is underway, new programmes could be set up that are more directly in line with the I4S, thereby gradually pulling together a new body of innovative stabilization work. The SSU would remain the bridge between MONUSCO and the I4S, communicating ideas to processes such as the Islands of Stability and DDR. In the meantime, constant advocacy at the highest levels, particularly in New York, may lead to a more thoughtful grasp of the concept of stabilization. If it wants to take a new approach to stabilization, MONUSCO has a strategy ready to hand.

6 Discussion with provincial government officials, North Kivu province, November 2015

7 Curran and Holtom, 2015

8 De Vries, 2015

9 For example, see Hannah Cooper, 'More Harm than Good? UN's Islands of Stability in DRC', *Oxfam Policy and Practice Blog*, 8 May 2014. Accessed 16 May 2014. (<http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/blog/2014/05/islands-of-stability-in-drc>)

10 MONUSCO, *Echos de la MONUSCO*, Stabilization Special, volume VI, no. 40, November 2014

11 De Vries, 2015

12 See for example UN Secretary-General's report on the DRC, 30 June 2014 and UN Security Council Resolution 2147, 28 March 2014

13 ONE UN press conference, Martin Kobler's end-of-assignment interview, 23 September 2015.

14 MONUSCO, Peace It! Mission Concept, December 2013.

15 Liam Mahoney, 'Non-military strategies for civilian protection in the DRC', Review prepared for the Norwegian Refugee Council, Fieldview Solutions, January 2013. (http://www.nrc.no/arch/_img/9165701.pdf); Severine Autesserre, *Peaceland. Conflict Resolution and the everyday politics of international interventions*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

16 UN General Assembly Security Council, 'United Our Strengths for Peace – Politics, Partnership and People: Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations', UN, 2015. Accessed 18 November 2015. (http://www.un.org/sg/pdf/HIPPO_Report_1_June_2015.pdf)



Credits

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